

*Artist's Relief*

Apparent in the glaze or veil-like softness of *Ghosts* (2025), and in the loose, seemingly accidental mark-making at the edges of *Smug* (2025), Emma Obrietan's (b. 1999, Seattle) new paintings quote yet subvert the conventions of late 1960s and 1970s Photorealism, reintroducing painterly approaches into a mode historically defined by its repudiation of gesture and textural affect. This reintroduction is registered most clearly at the level of surface: Obrietan's paintings demonstrate an insurgent tolerance for surfaces that fail to fully blend together, resisting the production of that quintessential photorealistic smoothness. Evident instead are a range of subtle painterly operations, from various marks and accidents – drips, smudges, and so on – to deliberate obfuscations of representational transparency or clarity. In this way, the very *realism* of Photorealism is unsettled. In a sense, the form of these new works conveys a tacit acknowledgement of an art-historical fact: namely, that the only way out of the representational 'zero-point' of Photorealism was back through painterly procedures of touch, gesture, and sensuous intelligence – precisely those tendencies deliberately bracketed out of the work by American Photorealists of the late 1960s and 1970s, but which roared back, to mixed effect, in Neo-expressionism and so-called 'Bad Painting' of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

In terms of the content or subject matter of the works in this exhibition, we might again cite Photorealism's concern with ordinary things (signage, machines, commodities) and everyday scenes. Obrietan's interest in the quotidian, however, is better framed as a layered engagement with a different realist tendency in twentieth-century American art: the traditional, value-laden images of technological and industrial progress celebrated in the regionalist impulse of American painting of the 1920s and 1930s, particularly the realism of New Deal-era WPA Federal Art Project painting. As with her methodological disruption of Photorealism, Obrietan's approach again hinges on deliberately skewing or polluting her historical reference point. The close-cropping of *Cultivator* (2025), for example, produces an uncanny 'all-over' image, zoomed-in framing creating an awkward proximity that interferes with the clarity or transparency of the depicted machine. The result is the transformation of an ostensibly realist image into one that is abstract and disorientating to look at. 'All-over' painting – long associated with Abstract Expressionism following Pollock's late 1940s and early 1950s canvases, works that eschewed centrality and balanced relationality in favour of a flattened, wallpaper-like approach covering the entirety of the canvas – historically succeeded New Deal-era Federal Art Project realism. *Cultivator* therefore collapses two proximal yet oppositional moments in mid-century American painting, amounting to yet another disruptive historical procedure taking place in Obrietan's painting.

In *AGA* (2025), the isolation and painterly rendering of a commodity sign produces an almost delirious image, with the too-close for comfort brand logo taking the form of an imposing or unwelcome apparition. Speaking of her interest in AGA cookers – a luxury commodity widely identified with a particular image of domesticity that is at once traditional, reassuring, and quietly ideological – Obrietan suggests the work be read in relation to the recent online phenomenon of the 'tradwife'. A tradwife (traditional wife) is a woman who embraces traditional gender roles and hierarchies, ditching her career prospects to focus on homemaking – her husband working as the family's primary breadwinner. In this way, the anachronistic image of the tradwife makes an appeal to some lost conservative paradigm – a time, prior to woke, 'cultural Marxism', or whatever else revanchist conservatives blame for the corruption of everyday life in recent decades. It is not difficult, therefore, to identify a latent crypto-fascist impulse in Obrietan's hauntingly over-proximate image of a non-contemporaneously coded commodity logo.

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*Smug* also plays with historical drifts – though of a different kind. The painting appropriates a prominent gable-end photorealistic mural located on Mitchell Street in the city centre of Glasgow. The vast mural, which is by the artist Smug and titled *Honey... I Shrunk the Kids* (2012), depicts a woman with a magnifying glass kneeling down to pick something up – presumably a shrunken child, though this is intentionally not depicted in the mural. Wildly popular – particularly with tourists, who position themselves in the empty space between the giant woman's fingers in order to capture a treasured photo for their social media feed – yet fairly derided as 'slop' by serious art audiences, the work is one of thirty-one similar photorealistic murals now located in the city centre. In a sense, Glasgow's new mural culture signals the debasement of both traditions engaged in *Artist's Relief*. On the one hand, these murals register the populist fate of Photorealism, as its techniques are redeployed to produce conspicuously kitsch large-scale public artworks designed to deliver an immediate dose of bright colour and familiar realism. On the other hand, mural culture in Glasgow points to the degradation of the social values of public art murals. Imagined a century ago by artists such as Diego Rivera and Ben Shahn as a means of presenting images of collective education, ideological struggle, class conflict, labour, and revolutionary history in sites removed from private ownership and elite institutions, in contemporary Glasgow, the public mural is reimagined as low-demand tourist fodder. In this way, Glasgow's mural culture evidences the capture of city centre urban space by council executives and their private partners, actors hellbent on delivering the grimmest version of tourism, culture-led regeneration and gentrification imaginable.

In synopsis, *Artist's Relief* is an exhibition that speaks of a governing *irrealism* within realist art. Across the works in the exhibition, realism appears not as a transparent window onto the social world, but as something warped, torqued, and anamorphically displaced. This distortion – which Obrietan registers in and through realism's historical forms – ultimately corresponds to a contemporary world whose own systems and structures have been stressed and bent out of shape in recent decades by the polycrisis that now engulfs us.

—Paul Pieroni